DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 552 CS 216 033

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TITLE Electronic Toads: Computers and Writing in Introductory Literature.
PUB DATE 1996-03-28
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Computer Uses in Education; Cooperative Learning; Electronic Mail; *Introductory Courses; *Poetry; Two Year Colleges; Writing Assignments; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Writing; *Composition Literature Relationship; *Response to Literature; Tidewater Community College VA

ABSTRACT

No instructional technique has brought introductory students in literature at Tidewater Community College (Virginia) closer to the genuine in poetry than writing their way into a work, in particular, writing combined with individual and collaborative activities that engage multiple senses and establish learning communities. Adapting to a computer the letter-writing exchanges and collaborative composition techniques that were effective in non-electronic environments has brought about more thoughtfully considered responses. An example of this approach involves three students reading and responding to "I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke. Students freewrote their individual responses, posed a question via email to the group, responded to another's question via email to the group, met to discuss orally their questions, write a short collaborative paragraph, and write a formal paper about the poem. (Excerpts from the transcript of the computer conference postings and excerpts from one student's final paper are attached.) (RS)

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Electronic Toads: Computers and Writing in Introductory Literature

ED 412 552

Presented by Donna Reiss, Tidewater Community College
Conference on College Composition and Communication, Milwaukee, March 28, 1996
When Writing Teachers Teach Literature (Session C.17, 10:30 - 11:45 a.m.) - Roundtable Presenter 2

Electronic Toads: Computers and Writing in Introductory Literature

In our open-admissions nonresidential community college, poetry is often the least accessible genre of literature and may well be the least accessible of all the arts. For these students, finding something familiar is essential to their understanding and appreciating poetry. If they recognize the **real toads** in poetry, then they are more likely to wander willingly through **imaginary gardens**.

No instructional technique has brought my introductory students closer to the **genuine** in poetry than writing their way into a work, in particular, writing combined with individual and collaborative activities that engage multiple senses and establish learning communities.

And no collaborative tool has been more effective than computer conferencing in giving voice to all students in a class. Adapting to a computer the letter-writing exchanges and collaborative composition techniques that were effective in non-electronic environments has brought about more thoughtfully considered responses. Students find a frame of reference in their own experience when they pose a question. The mutability of electronic text and the immediacy of publication with electronic mail and laser printing encourage both spontaneity and reflection.

In the example here, a group of three students in an introductory literature class read **"I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke**.
(1) All students freewrote their individual responses to an image of their choosing and then
(2) composed and e-mailed an informal paragraph addressed to the whole group. The instructions stated that the letter must establish a context of understanding and also pose a question about an element in need of elaboration or clarification. The next part of the assignment
(3) required that each student respond with a letter to one or more of the questions from other members of the group and send this response to an electronic conference. Subsequently,
(4) the group met together to discuss orally their questions, answers, and anything else that interested them about the poem. This oral component preceded
(5) the writing of a short collaborative paragraph. The final step in this process, which up to this point has used writing as an exploratory strategy, was
(6) the writing of a formal paper about the poem. This paper required citations of at least one published critical source and of at least one of the student writings.

Following here are excerpts from the transcript of the computer conference postings and excerpts from one student's final paper [all reprinted with permission].

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Initial Postings: Question for Classmates in the Group

Msg #1 Dear Classmate, The poem was full of beautiful words that described the woman. I particularly liked the way the speaker described the woman and himself as inanimate objects. For example, when the speaker stated that the woman was a sickle and he was a rake. The speaker is portraying the woman as something greater than himself when making that comparison. The implication that a sickle is a sharp and powerful instrument while the rake is dull and common. The speaker definitely thinks this woman is so wonderful. He even lowers himself to speak about her. The question I would like to ask is if the speaker is actually having physical contact with the woman or is he just speaking of it in the past. The reason I ask is in the beginning he states, "I knew a woman" as in the past tense but then the speaker states, "She stroked my chin." Is she actually touching him or him reflecting. Sincerely, Mark

Msg #2 Dear Classmate, I was particularly intrigued by the phrase "Of her choice virtues only gods should speak, Or English poets who grew up on Greek." Clearly this man loved the woman beyond words, worshiping the ground she walked on. He thinks no one is worthy to speak of her, least of all himself. She must be an incredibly striking woman because only gods or ancient poets can give her beauty justice. He believes his virtues and attributes can not hold a candle to her's. The entire poem makes reference to her beauty with the exception of the final stanza. Why are references made to "freedom" and "eternity"? I cannot make heads or tails of the end of the poem. Also, please explain whether or not you think the woman is dead. Thank you for your expected help. Sincerely, Tim

Msg #3 The question that I ask is whether or not you think that the narrator is in love or just in lust with the woman, and if he is really in love why is the title simply "I KNEW a woman" instead of maybe I LOVED a woman. Why is her name not ever mentioned in the poem. It seems that if he loved her she would be gaining some better recognition than just "a woman." Karleigh

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Replies to the Initial Questions

Msg #4 Dear Tim, I"ve been throwing around the question whether the woman is alive or dead and can't seem to put my finger on it. I've been thinking that the man is old now talking about the woman in the past. I think the woman might be dead because the speaker states, "Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay." as to say the woman was young like seed then age into grass. Then as time passes grass dies and turns into hay like the woman may have died. The speaker may be using freedom and eternity to describe death. It could mean "to know eternity," is to know death and final freedom from everything is death. I'm just taking a stab in the dark. I really couldn't explain the last stanza. Maybe it means something different. Hope this was helpful. Sincerely, Mark

Msg #5 Mark, I hope my thoughts and findings will help answer your question. I believe the speaker in the poem I Knew a Woman by Theodore Roethke, once had relations with this woman but she is most likely deceased. The majority of the verbs used in the poem are in the past tense, leading one to the conclusion that the woman has passed away. When he says "she stroked my chin," stroked is in the past tense.... When he speaks of her beauty he reflects, "Of her choice virtues only gods should speak, Or English poets who grew up on Greek." These lines indicate she is somewhere in the heavens where poets and gods who are long past can admire and appreciate her splendor. Also, when he refers to himself as "These old bones" he is a man who has aged considerably since their relationship. Finally, he speaks of "Her several parts could keep a pure repose." Repose means a peaceful rest, however it also refers to the rest in death or a grave. Hopefully I have shed some light to the meaning of the poem and guided you in the writing of your paper. Sincerely, Tim

Msg #6 Dear Tim, In response to your question of why there are references to eternity I think is because she is gone out of his life forever. I'm not sure if she is dead or just maybe they broke up. It seem like he is obsessed with the idea of their relationship. "Eternity" is all of the time that he will lust after her. The "Freedom" seems to be hers. I say that she is dead or just simply got rid of him and he still wants a relationship. But it's more likely that she's dead! Karleigh

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Collaborative Paragraph Based on Group Oral Conference

GROUP WRITING by Mark, Tim, and Karleigh: In the poem "I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke the group agrees that the woman in the poem is deceased. This is illustrated by several phases such as: "let seed be grass and grass turn to hay," "freedom," and "eternity." The first statement refers to grass being life and hay being death. "Freedom" is the passage from life to death and freeing the soul from the burden of the body. "Eternity" is where souls reunite, and he will keep his hopes up to one day be reunited with her again forever.

Excerpt from Tim F's Paper "Mortal and Eternal Love is Bridged by Death: An Explication of the Poem I Knew a Woman'"

Death and eternal life tie into the poem upon close inspection. "Of her choice virtues only gods should speak" leads the reader to believe that the woman is already deceased, although alive in the heavens somewhere. Another indication that the woman is deceased comes in the fourth stanza, "Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay." The woman starts as seed then blossoms into grass and finally dies as she turns to hay, as noted by Mark N. The speaker expects to pursue his love via the bridge of death when he states, "What's freedom for? To know eternity." To discover eternity one must be free. The freedom the speaker is expecting is the releasing of his soul from his body through death, and crossing into eternal love with the woman he adores.

Excerpt from Tim F's Works Cited Listing

N., Mark. Daedalus InterChange Conference "Roethke." English 112-04, Tidewater Community College, Summer 1995.

From "Poetry" by Marianne Moore (1920)

> nor till the poets among us can be
> "literalists of
> the imagination"--above
> insolence and triviality and can present
>
> for inspection, **"imaginary gardens with real toads in them,"** shall we have
> it. In the meantime, if you demand on the one hand,
> the raw material of poetry in
> all its rawness and
> that which is on the other hand
> **genuine**, you are interested in poetry.

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From "I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke (1958)

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

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http://www.infi.net/tcc/tcresourc/faculty/dreiss/pomtoads.html
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Updated October 19, 1996